

## 6. Marxist Left Parties in Bengal

For several decades Bengal has been the center of left wing Marxist activity in India. Marxist left parties can be found in other states, but there are few which cannot trace their origins to Bengal. Most of the Marxist left parties have their national headquarters in Calcutta, Bengal's capital city, and with few exceptions the nationally known Marxist left leaders have been Bengalis.<sup>1</sup> By Marxist left parties we are referring here to those Indian parties which claim to be Marxist or socialist but which are organizationally separate from the Communist and Socialist parties. In popular writing in the West, these parties would probably be called Trotskyite, but in the strict technical sense of being supporters of Trotsky and/or the Fourth International that term cannot accurately be used here.

### *REVOLUTIONARY ANTECEDENTS*

As elsewhere in Asia, groups dedicated to Marxism sprang up in India after the Russian revolution. But the antecedents of these groups appeared in Bengal at least a decade or two earlier with the rise of terrorist and revolutionary nationalist organizations. Two early revolutionary organizations especially, the Jugantar and the Anushilan Samiti, laid the groundwork for the later left wing parties.<sup>2</sup> Among the early revolutionaries were

<sup>1</sup> In the elections for the House of the People the Marxist left parties captured approximately 2,766,000 votes in the 1952 elections. Of these, the only major Marxist left party outside of West Bengal was the Peasants and Workers Party, which is in the Marathi-speaking areas of Bombay State, Madhya Pradesh, and Hyderabad. In West Bengal six Marxist left parties participated in the 1952 elections: the Marxist Forward Bloc (which received a national vote for the House of the People of 911,096), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (398,984), the Subhasist Forward Bloc (115,875), the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (26,245), the Bolshevik Party of India (25,792), and the Socialist Republican Party (which did not stand for the House of the People). This compares with a vote of 11,216,779 for the Socialist Party and 5,723,000 for the Communists and their allies. In West Bengal itself, the Marxist left parties won 586,889 votes for the House of the People out of 7,615,932, as compared with 720,304 for the Communists and 831,448 for the Socialists and KMPP combined. Figures from Election Commission, *Report on the First General Elections in India 1951-52*, Vol. II (Statistical), (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1955).

<sup>2</sup> The most authoritative work on the early revolutionary organizations is



writers and publishers of large numbers of newspapers and books which had considerable impact upon rising young nationalist sentiment.<sup>3</sup>

After the partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905, terrorist and revolutionary activities expanded suddenly. The revolutionaries boycotted British goods, and they attempted to blow up a train in 1907, to take the life of the Mayor of Chandernagore in 1908, and—the most famous incident of all—to kill a district judge in 1908. This last resulted in the accidental death of two English ladies, and led to the Alipore Bomb trial and the arrest of many revolutionary leaders.<sup>4</sup>

With the advent of Gandhi's first non-cooperation movement in 1921-1922, most of the Bengal revolutionaries joined Congress. They were deeply impressed with Gandhi's hold upon the masses, and recognized the necessity of converting the nationalist movement from that of a small elite to a widespread mass organization. Although the revolutionaries joined Congress, they did not accept the principle of non-violence which guided Gandhi's program.<sup>5</sup> While the revolutionaries remained inside Congress, some until Subhas Bose's break from it shortly after the beginning of the war, their activities continued alongside the non-violent work of the Congress organization.

There was thus a nationalist movement operating parallel to Congress which was prepared to use violence, and did, a movement which broadly accepted the leadership of Gandhi and the Congress Party but which was prepared to use its own methods. This movement continued to prod Gandhi and the Congress

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the *Sedition Committee 1918 Report* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1918). This is an official Government of India report and is often referred to as the Rowlett Committee Report.

<sup>3</sup> James Campbell Ker, *Political Trouble in India 1907-1917* (Calcutta: Government Printing Office, 1917). Chapter II gives a useful account of the literature of the Bengal revolutionaries, and Chapter III lists the leading revolutionary newspapers.

<sup>4</sup> Bejoy Krishna Bose, *The Alipore Bomb Trial* (Calcutta: Butterworth and Co., Ltd., 1922).

<sup>5</sup> In general, Bengalis did not readily accept Gandhi's principles although many joined in his movement. It is more than a coincidence that the two greatest challenges which Gandhi faced within Congress were from C. R. Das and Subhas Chandra Bose, both Bengalis.

Party to move faster and to intensify its activities. It urged complete independence even while the Congress leadership was prepared to accept Dominion status; and it urged civil disobedience movements when the Congress leadership still hoped that further negotiations would bring concessions from the British rulers.

In the 1930's, members of these revolutionary groups, as well as individuals heavily influenced by them, formed Marxist left parties inside Congress.

### THE PARTIES

*The Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP)* is among the largest of the Marxist non-communist, or rather non-Stalinist, parties in India. Its strength is largely confined to Bengal and Travancore-Cochin. It is the largest political group inside the United Trade Union Congress, one of the four national trade union federations. The RSP arose out of the Anushilan revolutionary group. In about 1930, the Anushilan changed its name to the Hindustan Republican Army, then to the Hindustan Republican Socialist Army; thus signifying its acceptance of socialist ideas.

As a result of the nationalist agitation in 1930 (which included the famous Chittagong Armory raid, when revolutionaries led an armed insurrection in the town of Chittagong, near Burma), a large number of revolutionaries were placed in jail, where they remained until 1937 and 1938. So long as these revolutionaries did not disturb the British prison authorities they were allowed to keep in touch with one another in jail, read books, do research, and study, as well as have their own football, volleyball, and cricket tournaments. During this period a large number of the revolutionaries were completely won over to socialism and were imbued with Marxist ideas.<sup>6</sup>

Several of the Anushilan revolutionaries prepared a thesis while in jail which they issued upon their release. With the adoption of this thesis by the Central Committee of their newly founded party in September 1938, the RSP became a distinct political group on the national scene.

<sup>6</sup> From an interview by the author with Tridib Chaudhuri in New Delhi in December 1953.



The thesis called for "communism and classless society," with the overthrow of foreign imperialist domination as the first task. The proletariat was viewed as the "only consistently revolutionary class"<sup>7</sup> and was conceived as being allied with the peasantry and the lower middle classes. In opposition to the Gandhian outlook, the RSP declared that final victory will "assume the form of a dictatorship, i.e. it is inevitably bound to rely on military force, on the arming of the masses and not on institutions established by 'lawful' and 'peaceful' means."<sup>8</sup> Self-determination, a constituent assembly, the annulment of foreign debts, agrarian reform, abolition of princely states, liquidation of rural indebtedness, nationalization of key industries and foreign concerns, the eight-hour day and social insurance—these were the slogans of the new party.

The thesis further declared that the Party "recognizes the USSR as the base of the coming Socialist World Revolution and seeks to defend it from external attacks," but that it believes internationalism to mean working wholeheartedly for the development of the revolutionary movement in one's own country.<sup>9</sup>

The new party became an organized group within the Congress Socialist Party, just as the CSP was an organized group within the Congress; that is to say, the RSP like the CSP had its own thesis, its own organization, its own propaganda, its own leaders, and above all its own allegiances and loyalties. It is important to note that while the RSP had avowed differences with the Communist Party, there appeared to be no important differences, until somewhat later, between it and the Congress Socialist Party.

The revolutionaries had a history and tradition of their own which they wished to continue. While the Congress Socialist Party was being built in 1934, the revolutionaries were in jail, continuing the associations they had had before. It seemed only right to them, therefore, that they should continue to work to-

<sup>7</sup> *The Thesis and Platform of Action of the Revolutionary Socialist Party of India—What Revolutionary Socialism Stands For* (Calcutta: Revolutionary Socialist Party Central Committee, 1946), p. 7. The first edition was published in 1938.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.



gether as an organized group. What their subsequent differences were with the Congress Socialist Party we shall discuss later.

The RSP threw its complete support to Subhas Chandra Bose, who for several years had had the support of the Anushilan and Jugantar organizations against the dominant pro-Gandhian national leadership. The RSP supported Bose for President of Congress and supported him in his opposition to the famous Pant Resolution, which required that the President of Congress appoint his Working Committee in consultation with Gandhi. At the Anti-Compromise Conference at Ramgarh, organized against the Congress leadership, the RSP continued to uphold the Bose group. The essential issue in this struggle between Bose and the Congress pro-Gandhian leadership was ostensibly the policy which Congress ought to pursue in the event of war: whether preparations for a mass struggle against the British should begin in anticipation of war or whether a mass struggle should be postponed because of the threat of war. But beyond the conflict over issues was a conflict between two wings of the Congress organization for control of the Party.

In 1940 the RSP described the war as the "Second Imperialist War" and argued that the revolutionary socialists must organize the pro-struggle elements within the Congress into an "Anti-Imperialist Peoples Front."<sup>10</sup> It was at this point, in 1940, that the RSP set itself up as a separate party apart from the Congress Socialists, and declared that the CSP was pseudo-Marxist and had moved away from Marxism-Leninism to "Social-Gandhism."

The Party maintained its anti-war policy even after the German attack upon the Soviet Union. In its thesis adopted by the Central Committee in 1941, the Party declared that the fundamental character of the war had not changed. Only a free and Soviet India, they declared, could help Soviet Russia.<sup>11</sup> In another policy statement the RSP declared that an invasion of India by Japan would be resisted but it would not mean a quali-

<sup>10</sup> *War Thesis of the RSPI* (Calcutta: Revolutionary Socialist Party Central Committee, 1940), p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> *Thesis of the RSP on the Russo-German War—Intensify National Struggle. On to Revolutionary Defence of USSR* (Calcutta: Revolutionary Socialist Party Central Committee, 1941), p. 18.



tative change in their characterization of the war, which was basically an "imperialist war."<sup>12</sup> Another resolution endorsed the Quit India slogan of the Indian National Congress.<sup>13</sup>

For many years Jogesh Chatterjee was the leader and the General Secretary of the RSP, but after independence and Chatterjee's forced retirement due to age, control of the Party—which is organized along Leninist lines with an all-powerful Central Committee, a Political Committee, and a Secretariat with a General Secretary and three area secretaries—fell into the hands of a younger group: Sreekantan Nair, MP and General Secretary of the Party and its leader in Travancore-Cochin; Tridib Chaudhuri, an MP from Bengal; Makhan Paul, the Bengal Provincial Secretary; and Jatin Chakravarty, the Party's trade union leader and organizer in Bengal.

*The Revolutionary Communist Party of India* (the RCPI, not to be confused with the CPI) is the party of Saumyen Tagore, the grandnephew of the great poet. Saumyen Tagore was a member of an unofficial communist group of the early '20's and was one of the organizers of the early Peasants and Workers Party in Bengal, Bombay, and Madras. In 1927 Tagore went to Moscow as a representative to the Communist International and was a delegate to the 1928 Moscow conference. For nearly eight years, before 1934, Tagore traveled through the Soviet Union and Europe. He opposed the "soft" policy of the Communists toward fascism in Germany in the early '30's and attacked the Communist Party of India for its "ultra leftism." His opposition to the official Communist Party grew so intense that in 1934 he broke with the Party and formed the Communist League, which later changed its name to the Communist Party, and finally to the Revolutionary Communist Party of India. The RCPI opposed the pre-war united front movement, criticized the war as an imperialist war, supported the Quit India movement, and bitterly attacked both the Russian invasion of Finland and the Stalin-Hitler pact.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-21.

<sup>13</sup> *On National Struggle of August 1942* (Calcutta: Revolutionary Socialist Party Central Committee, 1942).



Like the RSP and the CPI, the RCPI is organized along Leninist lines which branch up from party cells to a Central Committee at the top. After the war the Communist Party entered its terrorist phase, and in 1948 one wing of the RCPI began terrorist activities and was expelled from the Party after its raid on the Jessup engineering firm in Calcutta, which resulted in the death of several foremen. This group looted the factory, attacked a police station, and attempted to escape the police by fleeing in a jeep, but it was ultimately arrested and jailed.

The RCPI has some influence in Assam tribal areas and among some Calcutta students. It claims a total membership of about 5,000 to 6,000,<sup>14</sup> of which some 500 are claimed to be in Calcutta.

*The Bolshevik Party of India* had as its predecessor a group called the Bengal Labour Party, created in 1933 by N. Dutt Mazumdar, a young Bengali who had been deeply impressed by Marxist ideas during his stay as a student at the London School of Economics. Dutt Mazumdar and his group became deeply involved in trade union organizing in Bengal, and won some influence among the dock workers.

In about 1936 the Labour Party and the Communist Party for nearly all purposes combined, i.e. the members of the Labour Party, while retaining their organization, became members of the Communist Party. With war approaching, the Labour Party established a group called the Bolshevik Party, which was to be its underground wing when the war, which the Labour Party opposed, broke out. But differences soon developed between the Communist and Labour parties: the Labour Party, led by Mazumdar, broke with the Communists by its declaration that the war was imperialist and in its support for the Quit India movement. Mazumdar and the Labour Party then went underground, but in December 1942 Mazumdar was arrested. After his release from jail he ran on a Congress ticket for the Bengal Assembly in 1946, was victorious, and was soon made a Minister

<sup>14</sup> From an interview by the author with Saumyen Tagore in Calcutta in January 1954.



in the Congress government, a post he held until June 1952 when he lost his seat in the general elections.<sup>15</sup>

But although the Labour Party died with Mazumdar's entrance into Congress, the Bolshevik Party continued. Bishwanath Dubey, an active trade union organizer, is now the leader of the Party. While the Bolshevik Party members broke with the Communists by supporting wholeheartedly the Bose leadership in 1939, the Bolshevik Party soon lined up behind the Communists in their support for the "People's War." During the war some of the Bolshevik Party members joined the Communist Party, but the remainder continued in their own organization. The Bolshevik Party claims a membership of 3,000,<sup>16</sup> primarily in Bengal, but scattered in the states of Assam, U.P., Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Bombay, and Madhya Bharat.

The Bolshevik Party calls itself "the Party of the Indian Working Class" and claims to be based upon "the correct formulation and implementation of the principles of Marxism-Leninism."<sup>17</sup> The Party condemns the "Anglo-American imperialists" and expresses its support for the "glorious successes achieved by the Soviet Union in the field of post-war reconstruction and the consolidation of the People's Democracy in China through sweeping agrarian reforms."<sup>18</sup>

Like the other leftist parties, the Bolshevik Party calls for abolition of landlordism without compensation and land to the tillers, and for the repeal of the Preventive Detention Act; opposes retrenchment; and supports linguistic redistribution of states, confiscation of foreign capital, nationalization of industry, and quitting the Commonwealth.

*The All India Forward Bloc* is the largest Marxist left party in Bengal. The Forward Bloc was founded in 1939 by Subhas Chandra Bose as a means of uniting all the leftist groups in Con-

<sup>15</sup> Biography from Dutt Mazumdar in an interview with the author in Delhi in October 1954.

<sup>16</sup> From an interview by the author with Bishwanath Dubey in Calcutta in June 1954.

<sup>17</sup> *Political Statement of the Central Committee Bolshevik Party of India* (Calcutta: Bolshevik Party of India Central Committee, 1952), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.



gress in opposition to the then existing Congress Party policy.<sup>19</sup> Bose had demanded that an immediate militant struggle be launched against the British. His new organization was intended as a front for the existing left wing groups but in a short time it became a political party. Early in 1942 the Forward Bloc was banned for advocating armed revolt against the British. By then, Subhas Bose had escaped from India and was organizing the Indian National Army in Southeast Asia.

Several things must be noted about the early Forward Bloc. First, it had had no clear ideology as had the other leftist parties. While Bose talked of Marxism and Socialism, he had never clearly spelled out his ideas except as they pertained to the ways and means by which independence was to be attained. The Party thus had a program, but it could not be said to have had an ideology, in the sense that it had no general outlook, especially for post-independence India. And second, while the Party had been formed by Bose and had been organized around him, it was denied his active leadership almost from the very beginning. His early arrest followed by his escape from India to Germany, Japan, and then Southeast Asia withdrew him from active party politics in India.

From 1942 through '45 and '46, most of the Forward Bloc leaders were underground or in jail, while their party was under ban. On June 10, 1946 the Working Committee of the All India Forward Bloc, at a meeting in Bombay, approved a new manifesto for the Party in which it declared itself to be a socialist party with an ideology and program based upon the concept of a militant class struggle.<sup>20</sup>

Shortly after the manifesto was approved, R. S. Ruikar, Vice President of the Forward Bloc, and Mrs. Lila Roy, a member of the Working Committee, along with several others, were released from jail. They objected to the Marxist orientation of the new thesis and contended that, furthermore, it had been

<sup>19</sup> Subhas Chandra Bose, *The Indian Struggle 1935-1942* (Calcutta: Chuckerverty, Chatterjee and Co., Ltd., 1952) gives a detailed account of the early history of the Forward Bloc.

<sup>20</sup> *Programme of Post-War Revolution, Draft Manifesto of the Forward Bloc* (Bombay: All India Forward Bloc, 1946), p. 65.



written under the influence of Communist infiltrators. From 1946 until 1948, bitter rivalry existed between the pro-Marxist and anti-Marxist sections of the Party.

In December 1948 the anti-Marxist section met at Calcutta, while the pro-Marxist wing met at Chandernagar, the French settlement outside of Calcutta. The Calcutta conference, which elected as its chairman R. S. Ruikar, now the Party's General Secretary, and as the chairman of its Reception Committee Mrs. Lila Roy, expelled the Marxist wing for holding a rival conference under the Party name. It then declared itself a socialist party and appointed a subcommittee to "restate clearly its ideology and philosophical position . . . [in terms of] the ideology and philosophy of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose."<sup>21</sup>

In the meantime the Marxist section of the Forward Bloc, meeting at Chandernagar, declared that non-Marxist elements had infiltrated the Party and that the Chandernagar meeting was called "to stamp out all lethargy, counter-revolutionary deviation and reformist opportunism from the party."<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting to note that the two parties (by this time they were two distinct political parties) had almost the same political program. Both parties condemned India's continued membership in the British Commonwealth and the corruption which had entered Congress, and both called for socialism. Where they differed was in regard to tactics and strategy. The non-Marxist Subhasist Forward Bloc claimed, on the one hand, to reject the ultra-leftist tactics of the Communist Party, while on the other, unlike the Socialist Party, it did not believe socialism could be realized by stressing parliamentary means or constitutional evolution.<sup>23</sup> The Marxist Forward Bloc, while not commenting on either the CPI or the SP, advocated "the revolutionary seizure of power by the workers and peasants in the factories and in the fields."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Programme and Policy of Netaji's Party—What Forward Bloc Stands For* (Nagpur: All India Forward Bloc, 1949), p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> *From Arrah to Chandernagar—A March Towards Social Revolution* (Calcutta: All India Forward Bloc, undated [1949?]), p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Programme and Policy of Netaji's Party*, *op.cit.*, p. xiii.

<sup>24</sup> *From Arrah to Chandernagar*, *op.cit.*, p. 11.



As a result, on the trade union front, the Subhasist Forward Bloc entered the Socialist-dominated Hind Mazdoor Sabha while the Marxist group remained in the Communist-dominated All India Trade Union Congress. During the election campaign in 1951-1952, the Marxist group cooperated with the Communists, while the Subhasist group worked with the Socialist Party.

After the election, and after the merger of the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party and the Socialist Party into the new Praja Socialist Party, the Subhasist Forward Bloc and the PSP merged, with Mrs. Lila Roy and R. S. Ruikar both joining the National Executive of the new party. The Marxist Forward Bloc continued after the elections, although in January 1954 another split occurred within the Party which resulted in the expulsion of Satyapriya Banerjee, the Party's only MP in Delhi, and Amar Bose, a member of the Bengal Assembly. Both were expelled for advocating closer relations with the CPI.<sup>25</sup>

#### *POINTS OF SIMILARITY: FORCES OF ATTRACTION*

A favorite pastime of left wing groups, and one which, in a sense, is essential to the very survival of these groups, is to point up the differences between their own organizations and those of other left wing parties. But in order to understand what these differences are, it is first necessary to consider some of the similarities.

First, the leadership and the bulk of the rank and file of most of these Marxist left groups come from Bengal. In spite of their names, the Revolutionary Communist Party of India, the All India Forward Bloc, the Bolshevik Party of India, and so on are not All India parties, but tend to be confined to Bengal and nearby areas. Although some of these groups have organizations in other states, for the most part their strength is in Bengal.

Second, each of these left wing groups has a long history, tradition, and organization of its own. The Socialist Republican Party, among the newest (and smallest) of the groups, was begun

<sup>25</sup> Subsequently the expelled members, both of whom have a strong hold among trade unionists in the Marxist Forward Bloc, preferred to form their own party rather than merge into the CPI.



in 1947, but the Forward Bloc dates back to the 1930's, the Bolshevik Party and the Bengal Labour Party to 1933, and the Revolutionary Socialist Party, although officially launched in 1938, to the beginning of the century. These organizations, therefore, are not elusive factions.

Third, the left wing parties, with all their emphasis on ideological questions, have in fact tended to center around individual personalities. Almost all of the parties owe their origin to one key figure. It is difficult to conceive of a Forward Bloc without the leadership of Netaji Subhas Bose. Similarly, the RCPI was founded and built by Saumyen Tagore, the Bengal Labour Party and the Bolshevik Party by Dutt Mazumdar, and the Socialist Republican Party by Sarat Chandra Bose.

Fourth, all these parties claim to be "revolutionary," to reject the principles of parliamentary democracy. They do not, therefore, measure their strength or their prospects by electoral results, but rather by their ability to lead mass demonstrations, rallies, etc. Although they participate in elections, they tend to view them as opportunities for building mass strength and not as a means for bringing about a social transformation.

Fifth, none of these groups, without exception, accept Gandhi's principles of non-violence. Among the leftists in Bengal there has been a certain fascination for militancy and violence. The pages of Bengal newspapers and magazines are filled with tales of martyrs who fell before bullets or lathee charges; with pictures of dead or injured martyrs with bare backs or chests with open wounds. The anniversaries of their deaths are appropriately celebrated with the erection of public statues, and the accounts of their feats are continually retold. The fascination for violence even finds expression at political conventions. At the Revolutionary Socialist Party convention in 1947, for example, one member of the Party, Professor Girdhari Lal, gave a public demonstration of jujitsu along with a lathee, sword, and dagger display.<sup>26</sup> This positive feeling for militancy and violence may be one of the basic reasons for the frustration experienced by

<sup>26</sup> *Second All National Party Convention of RSPI, 1947* (Muzaffarpur: Hindustan Press, 1947), p. 2.



the left wing in Bengal when independence was achieved peacefully.

Sixth, all the left wing groups are characterized by their adherence to a "thesis." There is an important difference between a party "program" or "platform" and a "thesis," a difference not so much in content, although such differences exist, as in psychological meaning to subscribers. A thesis is, first of all, characterized by its statement of the party's "ideology."<sup>27</sup> The General Secretary of the All India Forward Bloc, R. S. Ruikar, presents a justification for and a definition of "ideology" which would probably, in basic meaning, be accepted by most leftists. "It is necessary that we must have a comprehensive view of life, a clear insight into the forces and factors that lead to progress or regress, into the laws and methods of their working and a precise formulation of our ideals and objectives with due regard to these forces and factors which help or impede us in our march. In simple, a political party to be worth its existence, must have an ideology—a system of thought to guide its actions."<sup>28</sup> An ideology is thus a "comprehensive view of life" and a party thesis is the expression by a political organization of that "comprehensive view." It is therefore more than a program or platform which enumerates the issues on which a party takes a stand, the laws which it advocates or opposes, or the foreign policy it endorses.

The thesis has a different meaning to its members than an ordinary program. The beginnings of a left wing group or party is accompanied by the writing of a thesis which expresses the basic values of the members of the group. When like-minded people join together to form a group, the members want to be assured that their values will not be damaged, that their basic outlook is accepted by the other members of the group and will not be challenged by them. Psychologically, *the manifesto or thesis is primarily for the members, not for the masses.* The

<sup>27</sup> We are not concerned here with defining ideology in any "objective" sense, but only to show the meaning it has to those who employ the term.

<sup>28</sup> *Ideology of Netaji—Thesis of the All-India Forward Bloc* (Calcutta: Leftist Book Club, 1949), p. 2.



manifesto can be characterized as a consensus on basic values, and the group thereby agrees that these values are sacrosanct. Because of their agreement on basic values, which allows them to debate issues within an accepted framework, discussion, not argument, may then take place between members. Once the group has its manifesto, intra-group communication is facilitated, but communication with those outside is made more difficult. Discussion with those who reject one's "comprehensive view of life" is difficult and agitational politics readily replaces discussion.

The manifesto or thesis can thus be distinguished from a political platform partly by the content of the document itself and partly by the attitude of the members toward the document. Individuals in a group can disagree more readily over a platform than over a manifesto. The platform generally assumes an agreement of values and goes on to make specific demands; the manifesto articulates values, reinforces them for its supporters, and provides a kind of value protection for the group. The platform deals with only small segments of attitudes and behavior; the manifesto's view is comprehensive. More concessions and compromises can thereby be made in a platform than in a manifesto, which has less flexibility. In terms of psychological meaning to the members of a group, *the commitment to a manifesto is greater than that to a platform.*

It might also be noted here that while a formal thesis is especially characteristic of the leftist parties, adherence to some kind of "comprehensive view of life" is characteristic of the Hindu communal parties as well. The Hindu parties, however, rely more heavily on the words of the party leaders and of certain classical writings of either present or past *gurus* (teachers). The *guru* is a leader with some miraculously given power. Savarkar fills this charismatic role in the Hindu Mahasabha, and Golwalkar (who is usually called *Gurujī* or "Reverend Teacher") does so in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. While there is some charisma associated with most Indian leaders, the rightist groups seem to rely more heavily on charismatic leaders as their guides on value questions, while the leftist generally rely on doctrines



enunciated in the party thesis, or in the writings of Marx and his disciples.

A seventh characteristic of the left wing parties in Bengal is their general agreement on most issues. They all claim to be socialist; advocate nationalization of industry, confiscation of land without compensation and land to the tillers, withdrawal from the Commonwealth, confiscation of foreign capital, planning, and government welfare programs; and denounce "Anglo-American imperialism" while praising the Soviet Union and the People's Government of China. *Were leftist parties merely groups formed to advocate the adoption by the government of certain legislation and a particular foreign policy, there would be no obstacle to the merger of the various left parties into a single party.*

### POINTS OF DISSIMILARITY: FORCES OF REPULSION

#### A. The Marxist Left and the Socialists

The left parties of Bengal have nearly all looked upon the Socialist Party as the "left maneuvering instrument of the Indian Bourgeoisie."<sup>29</sup> This characterization developed after 1938 as a result of the events which were occurring in the nationalist movement. From 1934 (when the Socialist Party was formed) until 1938, the Party, then the Congress Socialist Party, won considerable respect from the various leftist groups. Even the Forward Bloc, which later became one of its bitterest enemies, wrote some years later that from 1934 to 1938 "the party made considerable headway and virtually assumed the leadership of the left-minded elements within the Congress."<sup>30</sup> The CSP's united front with the Communist Party gave it an aura of revolutionary respectability among leftists. And the sympathy which Nehru frequently expressed publicly for the Socialists was another source of strength for the Party. In addition, some of the former terrorist-revolutionaries drifted into the CSP, including the entire Revolutionary Socialist Party, which, as we have

<sup>29</sup> *Draft Thesis—The All India Forward Bloc* (Ludhiana, East Punjab: Published by General Mohan Singh [1951?]), p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.



pointed out, formed its own organization within that of the CSP. But the attempt of Subhas Chandra Bose to unite the left movement under his leadership, beginning with his election as Congress President in 1938 and culminating with the formation of the Forward Bloc in 1939 and the meeting of the famous Anti-Compromise Conference at Ramgarh in the same year, resulted in a reshifting of attitudes within the leftist movement.

The Bose-Congress conflict not only involved a struggle within the national movement between "leftist" and "rightist" groups vying for leadership, but also involved a struggle within the leftist movement itself—not so much between personalities, since Bose's leadership of the left was accepted by all, but between organized groups within the leftist fold. The Communist Party and the Congress Socialist Party both sought to shape the tide of leftism in their own way. The fact that Bose never clearly defined his leftism (so that for many years since then the question of the extent to which Bose was committed to Marxism has been debated) and that the Forward Bloc was a loose bloc rather than a tightly knit political organization, meant that a great deal of room existed within the leftist movement for maneuvering.

The reelection of Bose as Congress President at Tripura in 1939 marked a high point for the leftists. The resumption of the national struggle against the British seemed in the process of reaching fulfillment. But following the election of Bose, G. B. Pant offered a resolution at the Tripura conference, with the support of the conservative Congress leadership, that Bose form his Working Committee with the approval of Gandhi. The leftists recognized this as a means of removing Bose's power and prestige as Congress President by denying him a Working Committee of his own choosing. In the bitter controversy over the Pant Resolution, the CSP ultimately decided to remain neutral, in large part so as to maintain unity within Congress. The resolution was passed and shortly after, as expected, Bose was forced to resign as Congress President. He then formed a Left Consolidation Committee made up of the CPI, the CSP, the Royists (followers of M. N. Roy), the Forward Bloc, and the smaller left



wing and revolutionary groups which joined either as members of the Forward Bloc or as members of the CSP. Bose organized a day of protest against the "Anti-Struggle Decision of the Working Committee," which prohibited local Congress units from conducting mass struggles without the approval of the AICC. The Congress high command then threatened to expel those who joined the protest. The Royists withdrew immediately and before the end of the year the Socialists, followed by the Communists, both withdrew from the Left Consolidation Committee.<sup>31</sup>

The smaller left wing groups, however, continued their support of Bose and his policy of militant struggle against the British. They became embittered toward both the Socialists and the Communists for their unwillingness to continue behind Bose. The Revolutionary Socialist Party, which until then had operated inside the CSP, severed its connections, declaring that the CSP had moved away from Marxist-Leninism to "Social-Gandhism."<sup>32</sup> The RCPI had always been critical of the CSP because it operated within Congress, and it looked upon the CSP's present "betrayal" as another indication that it was in alliance with the bourgeoisie.

With the isolation of the Communists and the Socialists from the Bose group, leadership of the remaining leftists fell into the hands of the Forward Bloc. They too bitterly denounced the Socialists for their failure to oppose the Pant Resolution at Tripura and their unwillingness to support Bose in his policy of militant struggle. After the war the Forward Bloc condemned the Socialists for their neutrality on partition and for their belief in "the illusion that socialism may be achieved through constitutional means."<sup>33</sup>

The differences between the Marxist left and the Socialist Party which developed between 1938 and 1940 were intensified during the post-war era as the Socialist Party shifted from the role of a revolutionary Marxist organization to that of a Gan-

<sup>31</sup> See Bose, *The Indian Struggle*, *op.cit.*, for a first-hand description of his conflict with Congress during this period.

<sup>32</sup> *War Thesis of the Revolutionary Socialist Party* (Calcutta: Revolutionary Socialist Party Central Committee, 1940), p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> *Draft Thesis—The All India Forward Bloc*, *op.cit.*, pp. 60-61.



dhian-influenced democratic socialist party. The following circumstances appear to be the reasons for the decline of the Socialist Party in Bengal and their divergence from the Marxist left parties: the failure of the Congress Socialist Party to give complete support to Bose between 1938 and 1940; the fact that the Quit India Movement in Bengal fell under the control of the Forward Bloc and other left parties, rather than the Socialists as in other parts of India; the Socialist Party's growing emphasis on Gandhism, which is viewed as a reactionary outlook by Bengali leftists; the Socialist acceptance of constitutional rather than violent revolutionary change; the non-Bengali leadership of the Socialist Party; the increasing respectability of the Socialist Party, which made it unpalatable to discontented revolutionary leftists.

#### *B. The Marxist Left and the Communists*

If the split between the Marxist left and the Socialists occurred between 1938 and 1940 over attitudes toward the Bose movement, the split between the left and the Communists occurred even earlier, in the late '20's and early '30's, over their respective attitudes toward the Congress Party.

The Congress Party, or "movement" as its supporters preferred to call it, always had a remarkable hold on its constituent elements. Even though parallel nationalist activities were conducted alongside the Indian National Congress—the revolutionary terrorists, the constitutional-minded liberals, and others—none of these activities ever became a permanent threat to the dominant position of the Congress. The early revolutionary terrorists, who later became imbued with Marxist ideas, were attracted by Gandhi's and the Congress's success at winning mass support and building a mass organization. Although the terrorists continued their activities into the early '30's, they soon developed a dual loyalty, first to their revolutionary organization and second to the Indian National Congress.

The Communists, however, in accordance with international Cominform policy at that time, refused to take part in the Congress and accused it of being a bourgeois organization seeking



not genuine independence, but the transference of power from one bourgeois class to another. Communist isolation from the national movement continued through the early 1930's until the era of the international popular front line of the Communist movement. Before the shift, young Indians, and especially Bengali leftists, were alienated from the Communist Party by the Party's rejection of Congress. The reaction of Dutt Mazumdar, the founder of the Bengal Labour Party (later the Bolshevik Party), was rather typical. Mazumdar was studying at the London School of Economics in 1928 when an Indian member of the British Parliament formed the London branch of the Indian National Congress which he joined. In 1932 Mazumdar returned to India a confirmed leftist, like a large number of returning students, but he refused to join the Communists because of their attacks against the national movement. Mazumdar then entered trade union organizing and in 1933 formed the Bengal Labour Party.

Although the Communists later joined the Congress movement, the leftists continued to feel that the Communist Party was guided by the dictates of Soviet policy. As proof, the leftists catalogue a series of "betrayals" beginning with the failure of the CPI to support the national movement in the '20's and early '30's and running through their failure to give complete support to Bose, their support for the war effort and their opposition to the Quit India movement, the "right" deviation of the Communists after the war when they supported the Nehru interim government, and their "left" deviation adventurists policies from 1947 to 1951.<sup>34</sup>

Other criticisms of the CPI have been made by the left groups, involving differences not only in current strategy but in evaluation of the international and domestic situation and of the meaning of the socialist revolution. The Revolutionary Socialist Party in its 1950 thesis upheld the classic "Revolutionary Socialist Way posed by Marx, Engels and Lenin" as opposed to the

<sup>34</sup> See Tridib Chaudhuri, *The Swing Back* (Calcutta: Revolutionary Socialist Party, 1950).



"new fangled China Way of Mao Tse-Tung and Cominform."<sup>35</sup> More recently the CPI policy of a "Broad Democratic Front" was condemned as a "class collaborationist programme of action."<sup>36</sup> The CPI is accused of trying to woo the wealthy, capitalist Tata and Birla families by "falsely characterising them as 'national' bourgeoisie in foolish parrot-like imitation of Chinese phrases."<sup>37</sup>

It is important to note, however, that with all these differences, there is a far wider range of agreement between the leftists and the Communists than between the leftists and the Socialists. The Communist Party is still viewed basically as a Marxist revolutionary party, and although on occasion some leftists will publicly deny that the Communists are either revolutionary or Marxist, they will not characterize the Communists as they do the Socialists. For the Socialists are viewed as traditional social democrats and as the second line of defense of the bourgeoisie. The Communists frequently "deviate" from the correct line, which is to admit that they may have been correct or that they are capable of being correct. *But the Socialists do not "deviate," any more than any bourgeois group can be said to have "deviated" from the correct revolutionary path.*

### C. Differences within the Marxist Left

Once having clarified their views on the Socialist Party and the Communist Party of India, the leftist parties do not take great pains to explain their differences with one another. Members of the leftist parties generally look upon other leftist groups as either being minor or as being close to the Socialists or the Communists. The Revolutionary Socialist Party leaders, for example, feel that the Bolshevik Party, the Socialist Unity Center (which broke off from the RSP), and the two wings of the Forward Bloc either have large pro-Communist groups or are actually pro-Stalinist parties. The RCPI, they feel, is a highly sectarian party and Saumyen Tagore, its leader, a very difficult person to

<sup>35</sup> *The Leninist Way* (Calcutta: Revolutionary Socialist Party, 1950), p. i.

<sup>36</sup> *Draft Thesis—The All India Forward Bloc*, *op.cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>37</sup> *Bolshevik Party Central Committee Political Statement* (Calcutta: Bolshevik Party, 1952), p. ii.



work with for personal reasons. On the other hand Saumyen Tagore criticizes the RSP and other leftist groups for their willingness to work in united fronts with the Communists. In contrast he justifiably points to his record of unwillingness to collaborate with the Communists. The Bolshevik Party feels that it has "systematically and correctly followed the path of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin by upholding the banner of . . . socialism and by trying to consolidate the leadership of the working class in the Indian political movement."<sup>28</sup> The Bolshevik leaders declare that theirs is a national communist party, and that neither the CPI nor other leftist parties are true working class parties with a working class, trade union composition like that of the Bolshevik Party.<sup>29</sup>

Whatever the similarities between the leftist parties, the forces of repulsion have been so great that unity has not so far been possible. By examining a situation in which an attempt at unity took place, we can better understand the elements which keep the parties divided.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> From an interview by the author with Bishwanath Dubey in Calcutta in June 1954.



## 7. An Attempt at Left Wing Unity: The United Socialist Organization

Post-war Bengal was leftist. Demonstrations for the Indian National Army of Subhas Chandra Bose, demands for the immediate launching of a struggle against the British, mass agitation, and the like were daily occurrences. A number of events appear to have provided the immediate stimuli for the rising spirit of leftism. As leader of the anti-British Indian National Army, Bose, the hero of Bengal, had become a national hero. For the first time a national armed force had opposed British power. And for the first time the leadership of the national struggle seemed to shift from Gandhi and his non-violence to Netaji with his emphasis on militant struggle.

In 1946, Bengal leftists, along with leftists throughout India, demanded that an immediate struggle be launched against the British. The Naval Mutiny and the enthusiasm for the Indian National Army indicated to them that the masses were prepared for a final battle for freedom. The negotiations between the Cabinet Mission and the Congress leadership, which followed, were thus a great disappointment to the leftists. The leftists argued that the British were stalling and had no intention of voluntarily relinquishing their empire; but at heart leftist opposition to negotiation was based on the feeling that it would be best if independence came as a result of prolonged struggle rather than prolonged negotiation. The leftists, whose sympathy for the Japanese was no secret, wanted to inflict a defeat upon the victorious British Empire. When independence finally came in 1947 through negotiations and the peaceful transference of power, they felt considerably frustrated.

Other factors contributed to the continuance of leftism in Bengal. The partition of Bengal only reemphasized to Bengalis that independence did not mean a new and happy life, for partition dislocated the life of Bengal, politically, economically, and culturally. Politically, it split the Congress organization between East and West Bengal, resulted in a realignment of forces within



the Party, and prevented the establishment of a strong and stable government. Economically, trade between East and West Bengal was severely hurt and the jute industry in particular was badly damaged. By 1950 the shifts in population had disastrously affected the West Bengal economy. And culturally, partition divided an area whose population had been very conscious of its own regionalism and proud of its history, language, and culture.

The advent of independence through negotiation, rather than struggle, and the unwelcomed partition of Bengal, resulted in a wave of anti-British and anti-Congress sentiment that was expressed throughout Bengal by the left wing parties.

### *THE BEGINNINGS OF LEFTIST UNITY*

From 1948 onward a major attempt was made by the left wing parties of Bengal to form a single organization under the leadership of Sarat Chandra Bose, the brother of Subhas Chandra Bose. In the remainder of this chapter we shall describe the circumstances leading up to the formation of this United Socialist Organization, its formation and its development, the obstacles which arose, and the circumstances which led to its failure.

Sarat Chandra Bose was a Bengali lawyer born September 7, 1889 to a renowned advocate from Cuttack, Orissa. He was educated in Cuttack, Calcutta, and England, where he qualified for the bar, and, returning to India, he joined the Calcutta High Court. Upon his return Bose became deeply involved in Congress politics. He first worked under C. R. Das in the Swaraj movement, and then served as President of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee and as a member of the Congress Working Committee. From 1937 to 1945 he was the leader of the Congress opposition in the Bengal Assembly and in 1946, upon his election to the Central Assembly in New Delhi, became the leader of the Congress Party there. As a close associate and supporter of his brother Subhas, Sarat Bose won considerable popularity in Bengal at the close of the war. With the absence of Subhas, leadership of the left wing probably would have fallen into the hands of Sarat Bose but for the fact that he was called to the Central

Assembly in New Delhi and was from September to November 1946 a member of the interim national government. In November 1946 Bose resigned from the government and the Congress Working Committee, returned to Calcutta, and formed the Socialist Republican Party.<sup>1</sup>

On September 1, 1948 Sarat Chandra Bose started a daily newspaper called *The Nation* which was to be his personal mouthpiece, and the organ of his newly formed Socialist Republican Party. Almost immediately after starting the new paper Bose left for Europe for reasons of health, and while abroad he issued statements to the press calling for the unity of left wing parties in India. "We should like," said Bose, "all the leftist political organizations in India to combine so that the strength of the opposition can properly be measured against the present government."<sup>2</sup>

Bose returned to Calcutta in the latter part of January, 1949, and in April a conference of leftist groups met in Bombay under his chairmanship. Speaking to about seventy-five delegates, he called for the establishment of a coordinating council to facilitate the cohesion of leftist forces. He met with representatives of his own party, of the Forward Bloc, and of the Peasants and Workers Party of Maharashtra. After they had conferred for several days, a Provisional Left Coordination Committee was appointed and resolutions were passed demanding that India declare itself a sovereign republic outside of the Commonwealth, that a new Constituent Assembly be elected on the basis of adult franchise, and that the country be administered on socialistic lines. Other resolutions called for land to the tiller and abolishment of landlordism without compensation; nationalization of key industries; organization of industries on socialistic lines; establishment of linguistic provinces; civil liberties; free education, including university education; the right to food and shelter; and abolition of blackmarketeering, profiteering, corruption, and nepotism.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Biography of Sarat Bose from the *Nation*, February 21, 1950; see also *What We Believe* (Calcutta: Socialist Republican Party, 1948) for the program of the Bose party.

<sup>2</sup> *Nation*, January 5, 1949.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, April 10, 1949.



The movement for leftist unity received its greatest impetus with the announcement that a special by-election would be held for a vacant seat in the West Bengal Assembly, followed by an announcement on May 6, 1949 that Sarat Bose would contest the seat on behalf of the Socialist Republican Party. Although on May 16th Bose again left for Europe because of his health and was gone during the entire campaign, the movement for left wing unity proceeded on its own momentum.

Later in May the Bengal Provincial Forward Bloc endorsed Bose and called for the establishment of a left front to unite behind him. A few days later the Socialist Party of West Bengal called upon its members to support Bose. The Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Bolshevik Party, the Revolutionary Communist Party of India, the Socialist Unity Center, and both wings of the Forward Bloc, all issued statements on behalf of Bose.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently the leaders of each of these parties toured the South Calcutta Constituency and campaigned in support of Bose.

Although the Congress candidate, Suresh Das, had received the endorsement of both Nehru and Patel, when the votes were in Bose had received 19,030 and Suresh Das 5,780.<sup>5</sup>

### ALTERNATIVES

With the victory of Bose the left parties, even more than before, talked seriously of some kind of united organization. In the weeks that followed, Bose's daily, *The Nation*, became the platform for various proposals for leftist unity.

In the June 26, 1949 issue, one unsigned writer called for a united socialist bloc organized along the same lines as Congress and suggested that the Congress Constitution be used as a model.<sup>6</sup> In reply, Shibnath Banerjee, General Secretary of the Bengal Socialist Party, urged *The Nation* to convene representatives of various left parties to find ways and means for bringing about united or common action by socialist parties on specific

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, May 25, 1949.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, June 15, 1949.

<sup>6</sup> "United Socialist Bloc," *Nation*, June 26, 1949.

issues.<sup>7</sup> From London Bose declared that when he returned to India he would make an effort to bring all leftist parties, except the Communists, into a single United Socialist Party.<sup>8</sup>

The difficulties in these various proposals were clearly pointed out by Tridib Chaudhuri, a Revolutionary Socialist Party leader. Two specific suggestions, said Chaudhuri, had so far been made for achieving left unity. "One is that the different left groups should be united on a common platform on the model of the Constitution of the Indian National Congress of the anti-imperialist days. But with several left parties already functioning as independent political organizations outside of the Congress with their own independent programmes and rules of discipline, how can we go back to the position of subsidiary groups within the framework of a common mass organization? Neither would it be very feasible to liquidate immediately all the different left organizations, and then permit the adherents of different groups to somehow mark out their own ideological distinctions without disrupting the common organization. I am afraid none of the existing parties would agree to this procedure. Comrade Shibnath Banerji has suggested a United Left Front of the different parties on specific issues. . . . How does he envisage the United Socialist Front when no specific issues of common struggle are present? . . . It is apparent that such an 'ad hoc' arrangement can hardly provide that united leadership or that sustained and continuous organizational vigour which would be needed to fight the reaction ruling this country today in the name of the Congress, far less could it undertake a Socialist transformation of the entire country."<sup>9</sup>

Chaudhuri then went on to propose the formation of a united left organization "on the basis of a commonly accepted minimum political and economic programme. . . . Every party adhering to the front must ratify the common programme and accept this programme as the minimum programme of its own. There should

<sup>7</sup> Shibnath Banerjee, "Plea for United Socialist Bloc—No Bloc but Platform," *Nation*, July 10, 1949.

<sup>8</sup> *Nation*, July 11, 1949.

<sup>9</sup> Tridib Chaudhuri, "Plea for Socialist Unity," *Nation*, July 17, 1949.



be a Joint Executive adequately representing the constituent parties for the effective campaigning among the masses of the people in favour of the common programme, for the electoral function of the front in coming general elections and for leading the masses in their local and partial struggles for the realisation of the basic demands included in the programme, and last but not least, to assume governmental power when the historical situation would demand that of the left."<sup>10</sup>

According to Chaudhuri's proposal, the executive would arrive at decisions by majority rule; each party would be pledged to carry out the common decisions; each organization would be free to popularize its own ideology and special program before the masses and recruit its own independent membership. But the left front could also accept individual members and give such members a defined but limited status within the front—a detail which would have to be worked out later.

Chaudhuri then suggested a minimum program that would include: breaking from the Commonwealth, abolition of landlordism, land to the tiller, ceilings on landholdings, exclusion of foreign capital, nationalization of key industries, national planning, recognition of Red China, and friendship with the USSR.

Chaudhuri then urged the leaders of three or four of the larger all-India left parties to meet together to work out details. He concluded by saying that at the time it was not likely that the Communists would agree to join such a united left organization, but that a section of the CPI which rejected the Party's present "adventurist-opportunist" policy should be welcomed.<sup>11</sup>

In the end of July 1949 Bose returned to Bombay from the U.K. Speaking before the Leftist Coordination Council which he had formed in Bombay in April, Bose pointed out that both the CPI and the Socialist Party had declined to send representatives to the Council, but that in December there would be a meeting of all other leftist forces in the country.<sup>12</sup> Soon after, Bose

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Nation*, July 25, 1949.



met with a number of left leaders to discuss ways and means of achieving socialist unity. All were agreed upon the principle of "coordination and consolidation."<sup>13</sup>

It was during this period that relations between the Socialist Party and the various left wing parties reached an acute stage. With the Communists deeply involved in "left adventurist" activities and in most areas under government ban, the possibility of their entering any united front of leftists seemed remote. But relations between the leftists and the Socialists were not so remote. From the beginning it appeared that Sarat Bose and the various leftist leaders were willing to have the Socialist Party enter a leftist front, but the attitude of the Socialist Party toward such a front was unclear.

Ajit Roy Mookerjee, Secretary of the Socialists in Calcutta, and Shibnath Banerjee, the General Secretary of the Bengal Socialist Party, had stated that the Party was in favor of some kind of united action on specific issues rather than in the establishment of a permanent bloc of leftist parties.<sup>14</sup>

The question of left unity had become a major subject on the agenda of the Socialist Party's National Executive meeting in Calcutta. In August Bose had a long talk with Jayaprakash Narayan in Calcutta. Speaking at a public meeting in Calcutta on the following day, Jayaprakash said that his party was prepared on *specific* issues to cooperate with other parties, thus suggesting that he and Bose had not been able to agree on the question of forming a quasi-permanent leftist bloc. This was confirmed by Ajit Roy at a public meeting in Calcutta on August 13, when he announced that his party believed in the formation of one united party rather than a bloc of leftist parties.<sup>15</sup>

By now the position of the Socialist Party was clear. It was prepared to see a single socialist party evolve out of the various left parties, either through the merger of these parties with the Socialist Party or through the creation of an entirely new Socialist Party made up of all these groups. But in the event that such a united Socialist Party could not be created, then the

<sup>13</sup> *Nation*, August 5, 1949.

<sup>15</sup> *Nation*, August 13, 1949.

<sup>14</sup> *Nation*, July 10, 1949.



Socialists were not willing to enter a permanent united front of leftists, but would instead support united fronts created for specific issues and for the purposes of the coming general elections.

On this question there was some dispute within the Bengal Socialist Party. The Joint Secretary of the West Bengal Socialist Party, Purnananda Das Gupta, openly opposed the stand taken by his party as ideal but impractical.<sup>16</sup> He resigned from the Socialist Party and joined the newly formed United Socialist Organization of India (USOI).

It was also reported that Shibnath Banerjee, the General Secretary of the West Bengal Socialist Party, had privately agreed with Das Gupta's view and had opposed the decision of the Party's National Executive, but, unlike Das Gupta, had decided to remain within the Party. Banerjee felt that the Socialist Party was overestimating its strength and underestimating the strength of the small leftist parties. He further believed that the United Socialist Organization would isolate the Communists and that the leftist groups would be drawn closer to the Socialist Party since Ruikar of the Forward Bloc, Sarat Chandra Bose, and Jayaprakash, all non-Communists, would dominate the front.

The National Executive rejected the views of Shibnath Banerjee and Purnananda Das Gupta for several reasons. The Socialists felt that the left wing parties did not have a sufficient community of outlook for them to work together for any length of time; that the small left wing parties were breaking up and their workers being pulled into the Communist or Socialist party; that they, the Socialists, were not basically sympathetic to some of these groups, particularly the pro-Stalinist elements of the Bolshevik Party, of the Socialist Unity Center,<sup>17</sup> and of the Forward Bloc; that the USOI was being started by Bose in part so that he could have a party of his own for the coming elections; that it was time to build up their own party strength and not dissipate their energies in any leftist fronts. And finally, Jayaprakash saw the need for a united party with clear principles, based on democratic

<sup>16</sup> *Nation*, November 12, 1949.

<sup>17</sup> The Socialist Unity Center was a very small (even by Bengal standards) leftist party which had split from the Revolutionary Socialist Party.



socialism, but he felt that Bose wanted a political party whose outlook was hazy and which might eventually align itself with the Communists.

Jayaprakash felt that such a leftist front would be external and for the public only, and that such a coalition of divergent parties would be incapable of providing an alternative to government by the Congress. But in spite of all these reservations, if the left wing parties were prepared to merge with the Socialist Party to start a new party, the SP was prepared to take part in a new party with a new name, so long as the basic principles of democratic socialism were agreed upon.<sup>18</sup>

### *THE UNITED SOCIALIST ORGANIZATION OF INDIA*

After several delays, primarily because of the poor health of Sarat Bose, the leftist conference was held in Calcutta on October 29, 1949. The conference was attended by 200 delegates and met at Netaji Bhavan, the old ancestral mansion of Subhas Chandra Bose.<sup>19</sup> Bose explained to the conference the circumstances that led to the meeting and recommended ". . . at this stage the formation of a United Socialist Congress with the firm hope that through common endeavour the existing Socialist, leftist and progressive parties will gradually dissolve themselves and a United Socialist Party will evolve out of the United Socialist Congress."<sup>20</sup>

It is clear then—and this is important—that the United Socialist Organization was conceived by Bose as a first step toward the eventual merger of all "Socialist, leftist and progressive parties."

<sup>18</sup> From an interview by the author with Ajit Roy Mookerjee in Calcutta in September 1954.

<sup>19</sup> The organizations represented at the conference included the Forward Bloc (both Subhasist and Marxist sections), the Socialist Republican Party, the Bolshevik Party, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Revolutionary Communist Party of India, the Socialist Unity Center, the Workers and Peasants League, the Revolutionary Workers Party, the Desh Sevak Party (East Punjab), the Bihar Kisan Sabha, the Workers and Peasants Party (Maharashtra), the United Trade Union Congress, the People's Party (Madhya Pradesh), Mazdoor Krishak Party (Bombay), the Praja Mandal (Bangalore), the INA Committee (Bengal), and the Bolshevik Mazdoor Party of India.

<sup>20</sup> *Selected Speeches and Writings of Sarat Chandra Bose, 1947-1950* (Calcutta: Thacker's Press and Directories, Ltd., 1954), p. 110.



Ultimately, there was to be a single United Socialist Party to replace Congress and bring about a socialist transformation of the country.

It is also important to note that the desire for left wing unity and ultimately of left wing merger was expressed not only by Bose but by all the Marxist left leaders. In writings and in public meetings they expressed their support for the new moves. Resolutions for leftist unity were passed by nearly all the Marxist left parties.

The three-day session of the United Socialist conference was concluded following a decision to form a Provisional General Council with two representatives from each of the constituent parties and ten others to be nominated by the President from among the non-party invitees to the conference. The conference elected Sarat Bose as its President and announced a twenty-four-point program for the new United Socialist Organization of India (USOI).

In December and January, harmony marked the work of the USOI. A provisional working committee, a committee for preparing a draft constitution for the USOI, a committee on trade union unity, and one on peasant unity were all established in December. Throughout January the USOI actively sponsored several demonstrations against the government's decision to remain in the Commonwealth. At the end of the month the USOI and the leftist organizations celebrated Netaji's birthday as Anti-Commonwealth Day, sponsoring mass processions and public meetings.

On February 21, 1950, following a prolonged illness, Sarat Chandra Bose died in Calcutta. Swami Sahajananda Saraswati was subsequently elected President of the United Socialist Organization. Swami Saraswati had been the General Secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha (a national peasants' organization) and more recently a member of the Forward Bloc. He was born in 1888, became a *sanyasi* (monk) in 1907, and in 1932 formed the Kisan Sabha in Bihar along with some prominent Congressmen. He joined Subhas Bose at the Anti-Compromise Conference at Ramgarh, took part in the 1942 Quit India movement, and was

a well-known advocate of left unity.<sup>21</sup> Swami Saraswati's tenure as USOI President was equally brief, for on June 27, 1950 he died. General Mohan Singh, of the Marxist Forward Bloc, was elected the new President.

With two leaders lost, 1950 was a year of great personal defeat for the USOI. But in spite of Bose's death, renewed effort was made during that year to effect closer unity among the left forces. The USOI General Council urged the merger of trade union organizations as well as its constituent parties. It appealed to the CPI to shed its ultra-leftism and called upon the Socialist Party of India to shed its policy of "reformism and sectarianism" so that all could join together in a socialist front.<sup>22</sup>

### THE DECLINE OF UNITY

In spite of the fact that the leftist dream of a united socialist organization *had* come about, there was still a feeling among the leftists that no true unity had been achieved. One reason is that left wing unity had always implied more than organizational unity. It had come to mean a unity and harmony of spirit on the part of leftists. Although there was no organizational unity at the time, that spirit seemed to exist for periods between 1938 and 1940, when Netaji Subhas Bose advocated an immediate militant struggle against the British and the left was united behind him. Similarly, the attempt at left wing unity reached its high point in the South Calcutta by-election when the left was united in a common cause around a common leader. By comparison, the formation of a leftist organization was anti-climactic.

In the absence of a unifying leadership and a common cause, a feeling of disillusionment grew, in spite of continuous reaffirmations of support and praise for the USOI. In fact it was difficult to discover what was lacking in leftist unity. In mid-1950 there were no reports of specific conflicts within the USOI. The transference of leadership from Sarat Bose to Swami Saraswati seemed smooth. Efforts to forge unity in the trade union movement were progressing, and in any event the Marxist left trade unionists were already largely united in the United Trades Union Con-

<sup>21</sup> *Nation*, June 28, 1950.

<sup>22</sup> *Nation*, April 3, 1950.



gress (UTUC). The program of the USOI had been ratified by the constituent parties, and no difficulties had developed over accepting the USOI Constitution. In mid-1950 the USOI had opened centers for the enrollment of volunteers for the coming Calcutta Corporation elections. And finally, in October 1950, the Parliamentary Subcommittee of the USOI agreed upon a Draft Election Manifesto.

But in spite of this apparent progress, the feeling of left wing unity was absent. By the end of 1950 the disintegration of the USOI was under way, and by the time of the election campaign in 1951 the USOI was split and all but finished. The first major conflict arose in October 1950 over relations between the Marxist Forward Bloc and Seth Dalmia, a well-known Indian capitalist.

General Mohan Singh, Chairman of the All India Forward Bloc and, at the time, the President of the USOI, spoke jointly with Seth Dalmia, the President of the All Indian Refugees Federation, at a meeting sponsored on behalf of Punjabi refugees. Saumyen Tagore of the Revolutionary Communist Party, and others in the USOI, strongly objected to one of its constituent parties' cooperating with Dalmia. The General Council of the USOI condemned the alliance but agreed to allow the Forward Bloc autonomy in this matter. The RCPI subsequently withdrew from the USOI, and for the same reasons so did Professor K. T. Shah, an MP and delegate of the UTUC to the USOI, and Purnananda Das Gupta, who originally resigned from the Socialist Party to take part in the USOI.<sup>23</sup> Disintegration of the USOI had begun.

Purnananda Das Gupta later said that his differences with the USOI dated back to the death of Sarat Bose and the election of Swami Sahajanand as Chairman. Das Gupta felt that, as Chairman, Swami Sahajanand was ineffective. Sahajanand and he had hoped for the establishment of an independent USOI, separate from its constituent parties. But with the death of Swami Sahajanand, control of the USOI fell completely into the hands of the Forward Bloc, with General Mohan Singh as its President.

<sup>23</sup> *Why RCPI, Professor K. T. Shah and Purnananda Das Gupta Resigned from USOI* (Calcutta: Ganavani Publishing Company, 1951), pp. 10-11.



Das Gupta had hoped that Saumyen Tagore would succeed Sahanand, but after the election of Mohan Singh he no longer felt that any good could come of the USOI. It was then that the question of Dalmia's connection with the Forward Bloc arose and precipitated Das Gupta's decision to resign.<sup>24</sup>

The final collapse of the United Socialist Organization of India occurred over negotiations for the general elections and involved the USOI's relations with the Communists. When discussions of left wing unity were under way in 1949 and 1950, the Communist Party was deeply involved in a program of terrorist activities. The CPI was not at that time interested in joining any front or left wing organization in which their own organization would be submerged with others. While they would agree to united fronts on specific issues, the CPI would not join any long term arrangement such as the USOI.<sup>25</sup> But in 1951 the Communists had shifted from "left adventurism" to united front tactics and were eager to enter into arrangements for the coming general elections. The CPI negotiated with the USOI and came to an electoral arrangement in which they agreed not to contest the same seats.

As a result, disagreement within the USOI developed with regard to their attitude toward the CPI. The Subhasist Forward Bloc opposed the alliance and subsequently resigned from the USOI. The Revolutionary Socialist Party, after disagreeing with other constituent USOI parties, broke from the alliance over the question of distribution of seats. And the RCPI, as already noted, had broken with the USOI earlier. Thus the USOI-CPI electoral alliance was largely an alliance between the Marxist Forward Bloc, the largest remaining element in the USOI, and the Communist Party.

Several of the defecting leftist parties, along with the Socialists,

<sup>24</sup> From an interview by the author with Purnananda Das Gupta in Calcutta in October 1954.

<sup>25</sup> From an interview by the author with Jyoti Basu of the Bengal CPI in Calcutta in June 1954; Jyoti Basu further explained that the Communists had joined fronts in Travancore-Cochin and Hyderabad, but these were confined to the elections or the legislature and did not function outside the legislature.



formed their own electoral front called the People's United Socialist Front (PUSF), with a joint election manifesto and an agreement concerning distribution of seats. The Socialist Party, the RCPI, and the Subhasist Forward Bloc were the three constituent members of the PUSF.<sup>20</sup>

Ultimately, the alliance between the Communists and the USOI was a great success. The Communists persuaded the USOI to allow them to contest those seats for which Congress Ministers were standing, and these turned out to be highly vulnerable seats for Congress. At the same time the Communists gained the prestige of being associated with a left front, especially with both the Marxist Forward Bloc and the Socialist Republican Party, both of which were associated with the names of Subhas and Sarat Bose, and the USOI benefited from the advantages of the superior Communist Party organization. When the results were announced, the CPI had won nineteen seats in the Legislative Assembly and the USOI another fifteen. In contrast, the People's United Socialist Front won only two.

After the elections the USOI was continued, but in name only. General Mohan Singh remained Chairman, but it ceased to hold meetings or carry on activities. For all intents and purposes, with the completion of the 1952 general elections, the USOI died a quiet death.

#### *THE LEFT WING AND TRADE UNION UNITY*

Closely associated with the problem of leftist unity has been the question of trade union unity. For many years the Indian trade union movement had been unified, more or less, in a national trade union organization called the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). The AITUC had been formed in Bombay in 1920 and had been closely tied to the Indian National Congress. In 1929 a split in the AITUC occurred which resulted in the formation of the right wing National Trade Union Federation and the Communist-led Red Trade Union Congress. The Communists returned to the AITUC in a few years, and in 1940 the National Trade Union Federation returned. A year later

<sup>20</sup> *Manifesto of the People's United Socialist Front* (Calcutta: July 1951).

another split occurred when M. N. Roy<sup>27</sup> formed the Indian Federation of Labour, but this remained a negligible force.

Throughout the war, the bulk of the trade unionists were more or less united in the All India Trade Union Congress. The AITUC was an amalgam of trade unions, each of which was dominated by a different political group. Thus, Congress, Communist, Socialist, and Marxist left political workers were active in the AITUC. In order to prevent a split within the movement, the AITUC Constitution required that political resolutions needed a three-fourths majority, but in practice effort was made in the General Council to achieve unanimity before the passage of such resolutions.

During the war years a shift occurred inside the AITUC. Since the Communists had opposed the Quit India movement and had endorsed the war effort, they alone of the major political groups were allowed to continue openly. As a result, while Congress, Socialist, and Marxist left political and trade union workers were either in jail or underground, the Communists had a free hand. It thus came about that during the war the Communists gained effective control of the three largest mass organizations on the peasant, trade union, and student fronts: the All India Trade Union Congress, the All India Student Federation, and the All India Kisan Sabha.

When the political and trade union leaders were released from jail at the end of 1945, they discovered that the Communists had gained control of the AITUC. The Congress trade union interests withdrew from the AITUC and in 1947 formed the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). With the withdrawal of Congress, conflict between the Communists and Socialists (who had remained in the AITUC) became so intense that in 1948 the Socialists withdrew and formed the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS).

In the early part of 1948, as a result of a change in the leadership of the Communist Party, that party turned to an "adven-

<sup>27</sup> M. N. Roy was a leading leftist with a following of his own. He was one of the early leaders of the CPI but had broken with the Communists in the late '20's.



turist" terrorist line. The non-Communists remaining in the AITUC complained that the organization was being used for the political objectives of the CPI. Although the CPI did not have a three-fourths majority in Bengal, it did control the union offices. It called political strikes without the approval of the General Council and used the AITUC office as a meeting place. Finally, at the height of the terrorist activities, the Bengal government banned the CPI and closed the offices of the AITUC.

In December 1948 Jayaprakash Narayan, along with Jatin Chakravarty of the RSP and Saumyen Tagore of the RCPI, convened in Calcutta a meeting of trade unionists for the purpose of starting a new union organization. At this conference a dispute arose between the Socialists and the left Marxists. The leftists wanted to include a rule requiring the approval of three fourths of the organization for the passage of political resolutions, but the Socialists wanted a majority rule. The Socialists also wanted to include the phrase "democratic socialism" as the aim of the new trade union organization, but the leftists objected. The leftists felt that the Socialists were keen on starting a trade union organization of their own, so on the second day of the conference Tagore (RCPI), Bishwanath Dubey (Bolshevik Party), Jatin Chakravarty (RSP), and Mrinal Kanti Bose (RSP) disassociated themselves. The Socialists then proceeded to form the Hind Mazdoor Sabha.

In April 1949 the leftists, who had by then withdrawn from the AITUC and had refused to join the HMS, called their own trade union conference and formed the United Trades Union Congress (UTUC). Professor K. T. Shah, an MP, was elected President and Mrinal Kanti Bose was elected Secretary.

Four trade union organizations thus had emerged by 1949: the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), dominated by Congress, the largest of the four national trade union organizations; the Communist-dominated All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which included, apart from Communist-controlled unions, those controlled by the Marxist Forward Bloc; the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), under the control of the Socialist Party and also containing the unions dominated by the



Subhasist Forward Bloc; and finally, the smallest of the four, the leftist-controlled United Trades Union Congress (UTUC), which included the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Bolshevik Party, the Revolutionary Communist Party of India, the Socialist Republic Party, and the Socialist Unity Center.

Between 1948 and 1950 no major attempt was made to achieve trade union unity. Finally, on April 1, 1950, a joint statement was issued by Ruikar, President of the HMS, Satyapriya Banerjee, the Vice President of the AITUC (and a leader of the Marxist Forward Bloc), and Mrinal Kanti Bose, General Secretary of the UTUC, urging the merger of these three trade unions and suggesting that a conference be held of authorized representatives of the three organizations. This move was endorsed by the General Council of the USOI.<sup>28</sup> By this time the HMS had agreed to the three-fourths majority rule set up as a condition for merger by the UTUC. Bose and Ruikar proposed the formation of a joint committee through which the three organizations could work together until their merger. Although Ruikar was President of the HMS, the HMS rejected the proposal on the ground that while it was willing to work with the UTUC, it was unwilling to work with the Communist-dominated AITUC.

Merger talks then began between the UTUC and the AITUC, but the General Council of the UTUC was reluctant to see a merger of its organization with the AITUC without the participation of the HMS. Further efforts toward merger were made, and in June 1953 a meeting of the UTUC and AITUC was held. "In pursuance of these talks a meeting of the General Council of the UTUC was held on the 17th of August 1953. At this meeting certain difficulties were placed by representatives from other states, particularly Bombay and Kerala. They complained that the local AITUC leaders had obstructed united work by their hostility to the UTUC."<sup>29</sup> The UTUC General Council then passed a resolution urging that "an earnest effort be made to have a joint committee consisting of representatives of three

<sup>28</sup> *Nation*, April 3, 1950.

<sup>29</sup> Mrinal Kanti Bose, *Efforts for Trade Union Unity* (Calcutta: United Trades Union Congress, 1954), p. 3.



central organizations of labour, viz., AITUC, HMS, and UTUC, in order to organize joint action on all important issues all over the country and to coordinate the activities of all the three organisations on a common front in general."<sup>30</sup> The UTUC proceeded to set up its own "United Action Committee" to sponsor such joint action. On the 18th of August a joint meeting of the General Councils of the UTUC and the AITUC was held at which the UTUC General Secretary placed his organization's resolution before the joint meeting. He called for a three months' trial for the joint committee, but the Communists rejected the move and called instead for an immediate merger of the two organizations. This was followed by a considerable amount of recrimination between the AITUC and the UTUC when the AITUC charged that the Revolutionary Socialist Party had sabotaged the unity attempt. Meanwhile the HMS refused to participate in the unity talks, having earlier refused to join in the joint May Day celebrations sponsored by the AITUC and UTUC in Calcutta. The efforts of 1953 to achieve trade union unity had failed.

The reason for these failures is obvious, and it is closely bound to the attitudes of the parties which dominate the respective trade union organizations. The UTUC feared domination of its unions by either the Communists or the Socialists. By the end of 1949, when the HMS had agreed to the three-fourths rule, merger of the two groups seemed possible. But in 1950 the CPI had shifted to a united front policy, and the Communists were then prepared to reunite the trade union movement. The UTUC was afraid of merging with the AITUC for fear of Communist domination.<sup>31</sup> This fear was shared even by the pro-Stalinist groups inside the UTUC—the Socialist Unity Center and the Bolshevik Party. The UTUC was thus prepared to merge with both the HMS and the AITUC but was reluctant to merge with either alone. It thereupon rejected the Communist move for an immediate merger and proposed instead a joint

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> From an interview by the author with Jatin Chakravarty in Calcutta in June 1954.

committee which would allow it, in the course of a three months' trial period, to judge whether it was then possible to work with the Communists without being dominated by them. On the other hand the Hind Mazdoor Sabha was under no circumstances prepared to work with the AITUC. It was willing to work with the UTUC in united front programs, and even willing to merge the two organizations, but was unwilling to do either if this meant dealing with the Communists. The Communists, however, said they were prepared to work with either or both the UTUC and the HMS in joint fronts and in a united organization.

The AITUC was thus prepared to merge with either or both organizations. The UTUC was prepared to merge with both, but not with any one alone. The HMS was prepared to merge only with the UTUC.

The position was further complicated by the fact that negotiations were under way between the HMS and the Congress-sponsored INTUC toward the merger of some of their unions. The UTUC attempted to negotiate with some HMS dissidents who resented the HMS-INTUC talks. The UTUC hoped that it and the HMS dissidents together could merge in the AITUC without being dominated by the Communists. The HMS leaders thereupon attacked the UTUC and said that the UTUC would merge with the AITUC sooner or later. To disprove this propaganda, the UTUC leaders became even more hesitant to merge with the AITUC.<sup>32</sup> The UTUC leaders became afraid that without the entire HMS and without a non-Communist majority, the CPI might eventually dominate them. The 1950 talks thus collapsed but were revived in 1953. Meanwhile the Bombay and Madras UTUC organizations, bitter against the AITUC for its attacks upon them, advocated merging first with the HMS, and then with the AITUC. It was to satisfy these groups that Mrinal Kanti Bose proposed to the Communists that a joint committee be formed of their two organizations to demonstrate to the Bombay and Madras groups that they could work together; but for reasons of their own the Communists rejected this offer.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



Merger of the various trade union organizations is thus closely tied to the attitudes of the various political parties. The HMS unwillingness to deal with the AITUC parallels the Socialist unwillingness to deal with the Communists. Likewise, the UTUC's fear of domination by the Communists and the Socialists reflects the general fear which the left wing parties have of these two larger political groups. The various groups, however, felt that while unity on the political level was obviously not possible, some sort of unity on the trade union front might be feasible. They felt that each of the parties could continue to dominate its own trade unions, but that the national federation of unions would stay out of party politics as had, more or less, the pre-war All India Trade Union Congress. The leftists thus hoped that through some formula—three-fourths rule or another device—such non-political trade union unity could be effected.

For the leftists, trade union unity has been a greater need than it has been for either the Socialists or the Communists. While the Socialist and Communist parties and their trade unions have considerable strength and prestige on their own, the leftist parties recognize their own weakness and therefore hope to increase their strength by operating more closely in fronts, joint programs, etc., with the two larger parties. But while they seek to work more closely with them because they are so small by themselves, at the same time they fear domination by these larger bodies. They therefore hope that in a three-way arrangement their strength would be enhanced by Communist-Socialist rivalry.

Indian trade unions have never had any independent existence apart from political parties. The leading trade union workers, with few exceptions, come from the political parties and do their trade union work as part of their political work. Relations between the trade unions are dependent upon relations between the political parties. Without some degree of mutual trust between the political parties and an agreement to "depoliticalize" the trade union area, trade union unity seems unlikely.



*THE FAILURE OF THE USOI*

We have described in the preceding pages the initial enthusiasm of the various leftist groups for the United Socialist Organization of India and the disillusionment that accompanied the breakup of this major post-independence attempt at leftist unity. What were the reasons for this collapse?

First, it is essential to understand that none of the leftist parties wanted a merger in which their individual identities would be lost. This was made clear by both Sarat Chandra Bose and the leftist parties in their rejection of the Socialist Party proposal that they and the leftists unite in a single party. Bose looked forward to the time when such a party might emerge, but he realized that at the time the left parties were unwilling to take such a step.

Second, it was not a lack of agreement on basic issues which divided the parties, for no such differences were an obstacle to the creation of the USOI. Rather, the leftist groups, rank and file and leaders alike, looked upon the preservation of their own party as being of greater psychological need to them than the political advantages of having a single leftist party.

Third, in place of a single party, the left groups wanted a united front type of organization in which each group retained its identity and in effect worked in the front when it suited what they conceived to be their own interest. None of the constituent parties, for example, wanted to see the USOI have an organization of its own with its own individual members since that might compete with their party in attracting new members. Furthermore, on the question of determining candidates for assembly seats, the USOI was to be nothing more than a meeting place where each party would negotiate an electoral arrangement with others.

Fourth, so long as the commitment of each of the parties to the USOI was so limited, what united them was not an allegiance to the organization but common issues and a dominating personality. From 1947 to 1950 there were many issues on which all the leftist groups could unite with some enthusiasm: annulment of partition, rejection of membership in the Commonwealth, and



attacks against the new constitution. But by mid-1950, especially after the decline of the movement of population between East and West Bengal, these issues had decreased in importance. As for a unifying dominating personality, none of the leftist parties produced anyone to replace Sarat Bose.

Fifth, with the absence of a unifying leader or one or two major issues which could unite them, the leftist leaders and rank and file lost the feeling of unity and began instead to feel the inroads which other groups were making upon their own position inside the USOI. The final breakdown, in fact, occurred not over any differences on policy but over the relations of strength between the groups. There was some feeling that the Marxist Forward Bloc had gained control of the USOI and was using it for its own purpose. In general each party felt that other groups were using the front for their own party advantage. Although the RCPI and several individuals ostensibly broke with the USOI over the policy of the Forward Bloc in taking part in a meeting with a well-known capitalist, the fact is that once they felt that control of the USOI had fallen largely into the hands of the Marxist Forward Bloc, they lost interest in the front.<sup>33</sup> Finally, the USOI actually fell apart over discussions on the distribution of seats in the general elections. The electoral agreement that was ultimately agreed to by the USOI and the Communist Party was, as we have seen, primarily an agreement between the CPI and the Marxist Forward Bloc, since by then the other major constituents of the USOI had withdrawn their active support. But by 1950, before the front formally disintegrated, the feeling of left wing unity ceased to exist and no sense of identification with the USOI had developed which might have overshadowed the fears each group had of the others.

The USOI was doomed to failure by the very limitation which the constituent groups placed upon it. So long as the front was built not on any organizational structure which would have allowed for the development of allegiances going beyond the constituent bodies, but rather on some common issues and a

<sup>33</sup> From an interview by the author with Purnananda Das Gupta in Calcutta in October 1954.



common leader, the front was likely to fall apart after the death of its leader and the decline of the unifying issues. What must be understood therefore is why the leftists were unwilling to see the development of a single party in which their own groups would be submerged. To answer this question, we must first understand something of the social background of Bengal leftism.

### *THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF BENGAL LEFTISM*

Two factors were primarily responsible for the rise of sectarian leftist parties in Bengal. The first was the breakdown of the traditional social organization as a result of the Western impact; the second was the economic and cultural dislocation resulting from the partition of Bengal in 1906, the loss of Calcutta as the capital of India in 1911, the growth of competition from Bombay, Madras, and other business centers, partition in 1947, the trade war between East and West Bengal, the refugee problem, and, finally, the general rise of middle class educated unemployment in and around Calcutta.

The breakdown of the traditional social organization in Bengal has been greater than nearly anywhere else since Bengal was the earliest province and Calcutta among the first cities to feel the impact of the West. Among the Bengal middle class the rigors of both caste and the joint family in large part have broken down. In their place have grown a large number of small social groups scattered throughout Calcutta and other large towns and cities of Bengal. There are associations of writers, artists, students, and teachers, and groups of just friends who come from the same ancestral village or the same school or the same neighborhood. Social intercourse among these groups is very limited and there is little active recruitment. Within the group, warm, affectionate, and genuinely intimate relationships develop; but with those outside, such intimate relationships are not usual.

The leftist political parties are not a unique feature in Bengal social life but rather an extension of these small, "closed" social groups. As with the non-political groups, social contact outside the party is nearly nil. It is not only that members of one political party have little social contact with those in other parties (which



is also true, to a lesser extent, in both the United States and Great Britain) but that members of these organizations frequently do not have any intimate friends outside their group, even non-political ones.

Social disintegration, by itself, probably would not have resulted in the rise of leftist groups, although the small social groups which have developed in Bengal would probably still be there. What has turned many of these groups toward politics in general, and leftism in particular, is the economic disintegration. That this is a major factor is indicated by the fact that Bombay, which has been influenced nearly as much by the West but which has not been subjected to the same economic crises, does not have a middle class with such intense political consciousness.

The appeal of leftism has been greatest to the middle class and intellectual groups, both of which have been socially and economically dislocated. The leftist organizations make little or no effort to appeal to those already involved in other political organizations but instead build their own student, cultural, and trade union fronts, and thereby pull non-political individuals into political activity. Their appeals have been especially successful with artists and writers who at one time had the patronage of the old zamindar landlord families. (In some cases the artists and writers themselves came from such families.) On the trade union front, the Communist Party has had little success with the laboring classes, who are largely non-Bengali and who have joined the Congress-sponsored Indian National Trade Union Congress, but have been successful with Bengali middle-class white collar workers. Finally, on the student front, nearly all the leftist parties have groups at Calcutta University. Most of the present leadership of the leftist groups joined their party in their student days. Considering the purposeless feelings prevalent among students throughout the country, but most intense at Calcutta University, there is little wonder that the leftists have their greatest recruitment there.

Why has the Bengal middle class turned toward the left rather than toward Congress or even toward the Hindu communal parties? Although Bengal first led the Congress nationalist move-



ment, it later became separated from the rest of the movement and from the rest of India, not so much because of the extent of the Western impact and the Bengal literary and cultural renaissance which followed, but because Bengal culture was not conducive to Gandhian notions of non-violence. The main stream of the nationalist movement by-passed Bengal, or at least manifested itself in a different way. To understand the growth of Marxism in Bengal one must first understand that terrorism and the spirit of revolution and revolt against traditional values existed in Bengal long before the advent of Marxism. Lack of sympathy for Gandhi's non-violence was converted into anti-Congress feeling by the events which followed partition, not only by the refugee problem and the economic dislocation or even the language controversy over Hindi, but especially by the feeling which Bengalis had that the central government was giving preference to other states. With Congress as the ruling party, the feeling of resentment and discontent is now naturally directed toward it.

But why was the discontent not channeled into the Hindu political parties? Like the leftist parties, the communal groups rejected Gandhi's non-violence and lauded terrorist and revolutionary activities. But the communal appeal contained two other elements: the anti-Muslim feeling and anti-Westernization. When the anti-Muslim element dominated the thinking of the Hindu groups and when Hindu-Muslim riots occurred in Bengal, many middle-class Bengalis gave the communal parties their support. But when the anti-Muslim question died out after partition and especially after the 1950 movements of population between East and West Bengal, the Hindu groups lost their influence. Throughout the country the Hindu parties shifted their emphasis from an anti-Muslim appeal to an anti-Westernization appeal. To the Westernized Bengali middle class this was no inducement. It is interesting to note that the Calcutta middle-class district which elected Sarat Bose, later elected Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the Jan Sangh leader, and upon his death elected a Communist to the House of the People.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Paradoxically, anti-United States and anti-Western feeling comes from



What is the purpose of these leftist parties? They have two functions: to fill the psychological needs of their members in terms of providing a source of identification and a new set of values, and to channelize social discontent. But these groups have not been "rationalized" in the sense that they "calculate" ways and means of being politically effective. Their *raison d'être* is primarily that they fill psychological needs. It is only when there is a common issue on which all can unite that there is much social contact between members of different leftist parties. It is interesting that the leadership of each of these groups does not encourage much social contact and in fact discourages it wherever possible. This is understandable since the prestige of the leader depends upon the allegiance which he receives from his group, so that the preservation of the group is essential to his position. The absence of social relations between members of different parties has been more of a barrier to unity than differences over issues. When talks began for the creation of a United Socialist Organization, it was generally agreed that merger was not possible at the time although desirable in the long run. But all these groups insisted upon maintaining their own thesis, their own program, their own recruitment, and their own independent existence. This becomes understandable when we recognize that these groups are separated not so much by differences over specific issues or even in general outlook, but rather by their group allegiances. Only when the issue is sufficiently strong to pinpoint their social discontent, or when a leader emerges who can provide a common identification, do prospects of unity improve. In the absence of such unifying factors, the psychological barriers to unity—the lack of social intercourse with other groups, the strong allegiances to one's leaders, organization, and program, the fear of domination by other groups—soon came to dominate the situation, and the attempt at left wing unity failed.

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the more Westernized groups while the non-Westernized Hindu-minded groups are more sympathetic to Western policy and more critical of Russia and China. On the other hand the Hindu groups are very critical of the Westernized Indian community, whose leadership of the country they intensely dislike.